Section of the History of Medicine

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Paper

Chekhov's Chronic Tuberculosis

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Anton Chekhov came of peasant ancestry. His paternal grandfather was a freed serf. His father was a small shopkeeper in Taganrog, who ultimately became bankrupt and had to be smuggled out of town in a cart. Although a fanatical, incompetent man, he had rudimentary artistic gifts, played the violin, conducted a church choir and painted icons. He was intensely religious and absorbed in church music and ritual, the practice of which he imposed mercilessly on his children. The children were beaten often, according to the custom of the times: 'If you don't kick me, you don't love me' (Russian proverb). The children were also deprived of sleep to officiate at ceremonies early and late in Taganrog Cathedral. Long religious fasts and devotional exercises in the home were an additional burden. But Chekhov retained an affection for the church and, although he ceased to believe in formal religion, remained saturated in knowledge of everything orthodox. He wrote to a friend: 'When I recall now my childhood it seems like a sombre day; for me to-day religion is dead.' In his mature years he built a steeple for the village church in Melikhovo and also built a village school in the same district.

If the exercises of religious observance in childhood helped to create ambivalent feelings, his equally unpleasant introduction to education had no such effect, for he regarded education as the sole salvation of Russia.

Magarshack[1] quotes an autobiographical passage from 'Three Years' (1895): 'I remember father began to teach me, or, to put it more plainly, whip me, when I was only five years old. He whipped me, boxed my ears, hit me over the head, and the first question I asked myself on awakening every morning was: will I be whipped again to-day? I was forbidden to play games or romp. I had to attend the morning and evening church services, kiss the hands of priests and monks, read psalms at home . . . When I was eight years old, I had to mind the shop; I worked as an ordinary errand boy, and that affected my health, for I was beaten almost every day.'

Chekhov's father married the daughter of a merchant, when she was 19 years of age. There were six children, five boys and one girl, and they all lived to grow up. The mother was unintellectual and poorly educated, but warm-hearted. The family produced by these parents showed unusual ability. Two of Chekhov's brothers had great artistic gifts, but became alcoholics at an early age. A younger brother, Michael, wrote a life of Anton which, according to Magarshack, suffers from the common defect of family biography. His only sister was a teacher.

Anton took ten years to complete the eight-year course at Taganrog grammar school, having to spend two years in the third and fifth classes. This was largely the fault of his father for making him work in the shop, and he did better after the family left Taganrog. He always had unusual strength of character and established a moral ascendancy over his two elder brothers at an early age. When he was 16, the family left for Moscow in a hurry. Anton remained in Taganrog to complete his studies, and earned a little money by teaching younger children. When he was 19 he joined the family in their overcrowded quarters in a low-class district of Moscow (actually one of the brothel districts) and matriculated in the Moscow University medical school. For the next five years Anton's time was occupied with medical studies and the hack journalism which he began before the age of 20 to help the family budget. In 1884 he obtained his medical degree, and about the same time he contracted the pulmonary tuberculosis from which he died twenty years later.

'Character is destiny', and the key to an understanding of Chekhov's art is knowledge of the man who created the stories and plays. Before he

[1]Magarshack D (1952) Chekhov. London

was 30 he was famous as a short story writer, his first full-length play, 'Ivanov', had been produced in Moscow and Petersburg, and he had been awarded the Pushkin prize for literature. The early stories sparkle with wit, and vivid thumbnail sketches illuminate some peculiarity or characteristic trait. At this time he regarded himself as primarily a doctor, and to the end of his life he was torn between the drives to medicine and literature. 'Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other . . . If I did not have my medical work I doubt if I could have given my leisure and my spare thoughts to literature' (Letter, 1888). In 1884 he was offered a resident post in a country hospital not far from Moscow, but instead he took a flat, put up his plate, and practised to a considerable extent until 1890. Soon he was making friends in Petersburg, writing a steady stream of stories and experimenting with short plays. In spite of poverty, he had taken part in Moscow night life as a student. Although he never became an alcoholic like his brothers, he was fond of good food, wine, vodka and feminine society. There was always a woman in his life since his boyhood – 'I was initiated into the secret of love at the age of thirteen'.

In December 1884 Chekhov had the first unequivocal symptoms of the pulmonary tuberculosis which killed him twenty years later. After sitting for several days in a cold draughty courtroom, where he was reporting a *cause célèbre* for the Petersburg Gazette, he coughed blood for several days. In a few weeks he was back at work. An earlier feverish illness in December 1883 was probably the initial episode of his disease. Until 1883 his health had been robust. He had one serious illness in adolescence; the date of this is uncertain but Magarshack considers the summer of 1876 the probable time. Anton and his brother Michael were on holiday when he caught a cold when bathing in a river. They had to spend a night in a Jewish wayside inn, where he was treated with mustard poultices and compresses. He returned home looking very ill, but apparently soon recovered under the care of the doctor of Taganrog grammar school. Eleven years later, Chekhov wrote to the poet Plescheyov: 'in 1877 I fell ill with peritonitis while travelling in the country and spent a night with Moissey Moisseyevich' (immortalized in 'The Steppe'). It has been suggested that this illness was tuberculous peritonitis and the real onset of his disease. This is improbable, for tuberculous peritonitis is commonly a prolonged disabling disease. The scanty references in a letter of Chekhov's and in Michael's biography suggest a short illness and complete recovery. Apart from an attack of gastro-enteritis and hæmorrhoids in 1887, he remained an active, apparently healthy man until 1890. Throughout his adult life he paid the penalty for intense, incessant mental concentration by insomnia, nightmares and headaches. But in 1887 Korolenko described him as full of the joy of life, his eyes sparkling with wit and high spirits.

In April 1890 Chekhov began an adventure of considerable danger and difficulty, the journey across Siberia to the island convict settlement of Sakhalin. Here the most desperate criminals were herded with political prisoners from the whole Russian empire. He attached great importance to the visit, studying intensively in the libraries of Petersburg and applying, though without success, for official assistance in seeing political prisoners. He stayed on the island for three months, getting up at five o'clock and working all day, visiting settlements, talking to everyone except the political prisoners and making a census. His researches were embodied in a book of four hundred pages, which has not been translated into English. Dewhurst[1] describes it as 'a sombre and academic work well laced with facts and figures'. The close-up view of Sakhalin had a profound influence on his scale of moral values. He said that before the visit he considered 'The Kreutzer Sonata' a great book, but that after seeing life in the convict settlement he considered it great nonsense.

The prolonged strain of the journey across Siberia in an open carriage, fording streams, crossing swollen rivers by ferry, often travelling all night, and the long hours of work in Sakhalin were disastrous to his health. In December 1890 he wrote: 'Journeying to Sakhalin and back I felt absolutely well, but now that I am home the devil only knows what goes on within me. I have a continual slight headache, a general feeling of lassitude, I tire easily, am apathetic and, the thing that bothers me most, have palpitations of the heart.'

After returning from Sakhalin he began to spend more time in the country. In the summer of 1891 he was bathing daily at his country cottage, but later his cough was troublesome again. In November he had a severe bout of 'influenza', that well-worn euphemism for an exacerbation of phthisis. Canvassing for the orphan children of Sakhalin, organization of famine relief and voluntary medical practice among the local peasantry kept him busy when he was not writing. In March 1892 he bought a small country estate at Melikhovo, where he worked all day in the garden. In 1944 he was still remembered by the peasants in Melikhovo for his voluntary medical work. In January 1893 he was in Petersburg again but 'ill, part of the time'. In May he wrote that he was

[1]**Dewhurst K** (1955) *J. Hist. Med.* **10**, 1

ill, sick and tired of his patients, and during the following winter his health deteriorated further. He stayed for a time in the Crimea and visited Italy, Nice and Paris in the autumn of 1894. He coughed incessantly now and had a hæmoptysis again in September 1895.

In March 1897 he had a severe hæmoptysis in a Moscow restaurant. Later he was admitted to hospital, joking about his presence in Ward No. 16, ten numbers higher than 'Ward No. 6', already famous throughout Russia. Everybody, including the patient, expected him to die at this time, but in July he was back in Petersburg, feeling and looking much better. He spent the whole winter of 1897–8 in Biarritz and Nice, returning to Russia in April. Characteristically, he brought 319 volumes of the French classics to Taganrog library, only one of numerous gifts to his native town. In January 1900, a Moscow specialist reported that the right lung was better but his left lung was worse; there were also symptoms suspicious of tuberculous enteritis. At Easter 1900 he was in Yalta, had a serious hæmorrhage, looked pale and haggard, but was able to organize a fund for the tuberculous poor. In spite of bouts of fever he wrote his masterpiece 'The Three Sisters' during the year and it was soon presented by the Arts theatre.

In May 1901 he married Olga Knipper, an actress of the Arts Theatre. The dying man concealed his true condition behind a mask of humour and irony. It is, however, startling that Olga Knipper did not realize the true nature of his illness until shortly before his death, an example of the blindness of love. She kept urging him to write a new work, addressing him as the Russian Maupassant. 'All that you have to do is to sit at your desk for a short time and something beautiful will emerge.' The world probably owes his last and greatest play, 'The Cherry Orchard', to this insistence. After writing very little in 1901 and 1902, he made his final effort in 1903. 'The Cherry Orchard' was produced at the Arts Theatre in January 1904. The dying author appeared reluctantly on the stage to receive an ovation. Stanislavski, the producer, did not interpret the work at all as Chekhov had intended, introducing elements of sentimentality and pathos. Today the Moscow Arts Theatre acts the play in the spirit of gentle ridicule which is true to Chekhov's intention. 'The Cherry Orchard' was his last work: he died suddenly at Badenweiler in July 1904.

Chekhov's illness began in 1883 or 1884, but his health and strength were not seriously impaired until after the journey to Sakhalin in 1890. His condition deteriorated between the winter of 1890–1 and the serious breakdown in March 1897. From this time until his death he was a very sick man. It is probable that he attached little importance to his disease until 1897. There was a strong family history of tuberculosis. Anton contracted the disease in 1883, or at the latest in 1884, and lived for twenty years. One of his elder brothers, Nicholas, fell ill with acute tuberculosis in March 1889, and died in three months, a common fate of alcoholics at this period. Aunt Feodossia, who lived with the family, died of tuberculosis two years after Nicholas. An uncle also died of the same disease.

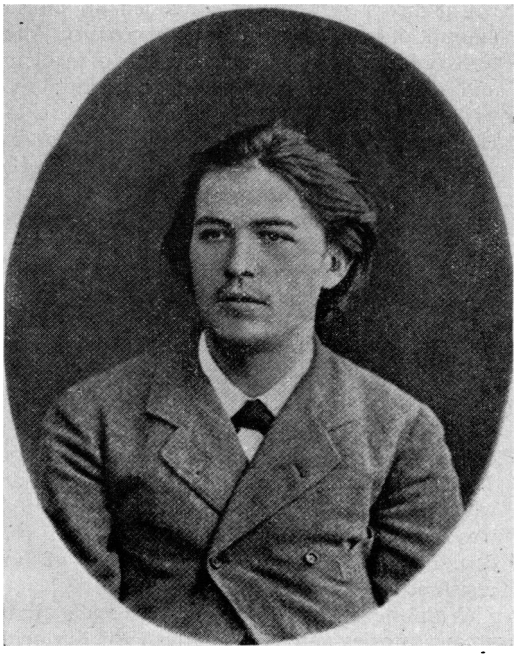

Fig 1 *Chekhov as a student, 1883. (Reproduced from Magarshack, 1952, by kind permission)*

The occurrence of so many cases in one family points to massive or repeated infection. It is even more significant that all the cases in the family ended fatally, which indicates a familial lack of resistance. In the circumstances, it is remarkable that Anton survived for twenty years, pursuing every kind of activity almost to the end. It was only after 1890 that the physical changes which chronic tuberculosis inevitably causes began to affect his way of living. If the disease really influenced his art, the evidence should lie in the work of his last years. Study of the available photographs shows Chekhov as a vigorous, handsome young man in 1879 and 1883. In 1888 there were signs of incipient phthisis – facies amabilis and wasting of the orbital fat. All the later photographs, many of which are obviously re-touched, show a sick, wasted man. The portrait by Braz, painted in Nice in 1898, is more revealing than any of the later photographs.

Chekhov's personality contained an unusual amount of both amiability and generosity. Affection for his family, devotion to the art of medicine, and the ceaseless striving for perfection as a writer remained with him to the end of his life. He maintained complete reserve with the family about his work, and later, about the nature of his illness. Gorki[1] epitomized Chekhov's character: 'You are the first man I have met who is free and bows down before nothing.'

The terrible story 'Ward No. 6' (1892) was accepted by Chekhov's contemporaries as a veiled criticism of the regime. The hospital was the empire; the brutal attendant – the Czar; the doctor – the intelligentsia. Lenin said: 'When I read this story to the end I was filled with awe. I could not remain in my room and went out of doors. I felt as if I were locked up in a ward too.' This is the most famous of the medical stories, of which he wrote many. Whether or not the story was intended as veiled political satire, it is certainly aimed at the Tolstoian cult of non-resistance.

With the exception of 'The Steppe', all the greatest stories were written after 1890, during the period of progressive ill-health. He wrote very few stories after 1899, conserving his strength for the last plays, 'The Three Sisters' and 'The Cherry Orchard'. The Chekhovian method eludes exact definition but is unmistakable to the reader. The poetic elements, which are constantly emerging in everything he wrote, are never incongruous in the most realistic settings. This is because Chekhov saw beauty as a basic part of life, to be found wherever sought. Boris Pasternak found that the special quality of the plays was the presentation of man, as a part of nature, like the countryside and the sky. 'The cues and speeches were taken and snatched out of the spaces and the air they were spoken in . . .' (from a letter of Pasternak to Stephen Spender).

The special techniques used in the last plays were devised partly to circumvent the censorship. The presence of social and political criticism, overt or disguised, in his writings must be viewed in the light of the censorship, ever present, arbitrary and capricious. He met this problem when he began to write for the comic papers in his student days, and he soon found out how to cope with it. As a playwright, Chekhov had to run the gauntlet of theatre boards, as well as official censorship. The repertoire commission of a Moscow theatre, which included several professors, demanded alterations in 'Uncle Vanya', since it could not approve of Uncle Vanya shooting at a professor! Chekhov's reply was to withdraw the play and send it to the Moscow Arts Theatre. In spite of apparent absurdity, the censorship had a consistent aim: the suppression of all free thought and criticism. Magarshack has described the storm provoked by 'Peasants' (1897), when Chekhov was threatened with arrest if he did not remove a page which criticized the authorities. His writings remain a living proof that a social system may be condemned without a word of open attack. He foresaw the certainty of revolutionary change in Russia, but was not interested in the mechanism of revolution.

Chronic tuberculosis shortened Chekhov's life, but failing health did not change the essential man. Towards the end of his life he wrote to Professor Rossolino that the study of medicine had exerted a profound influence on his writings. He never suggested that tuberculosis had influenced his work. It is true that his 'pessimistic period' (1886–9), which included 'Ivanov' and 'A Dreary Story', happens to coincide with the onset of tuberculosis. Developing power of expression is probably one of the reasons for the change in subjects and treatment at this time. Also the years after 1884 were the period of an intense struggle for self-improvement, during which the little shop boy from Taganrog and the student from a dilapidated home in a Moscow slum became a man of the world and a famous writer. Chekhov often said that he educated himself at the cost of his youth. Tuberculosis did not interfere with Chekhov's growth as an artist, although weakness slowed down his output in the last years. In contrast to D H Lawrence, who wrote his masterpieces before health and strength were seriously impaired, Chekhov died at the peak of his creative power.

(Meeting to be continued)

[1]Hare R (1962) Maxim Gorki. London